

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### The Bus Crash

Monday the seventh of May dawned a fated day. A puckle mile north of Auchpinkie, on the other side of the estuary, lived Jock Stott, in a white painted cottage on a hill inland of the main line to Aberdeen, yet still in hail of the sea. Below his kitchen window the land dropped away to the railway cutty, and on the far side was a promontory, a cliffy headland—though the cliffs were lower here than at Auchpinkie—a promontory that had a queer air to it, as if it was out of place, a misfit in the landscape. Upon this rounded lump that stuck out into the sea was a structure that, at first sight and silhouetted against the rosy dawn, looked for all the world like a fortress, a castle of some ancient and doughty Scottish legend, so square, squat, low, and massive was it. But in reality its provenance was more mundane, though of interest still.

It was no wonder that this headland seemed queer; for here in the midst of a coastline made entirely of red sandstone, issued a seam of limestone from the very bones of the earth. You would see, as you lingered in the early light, that the structure you had thought to be a castle had huge holes in its walls, and a few moments' close inspection would reveal it to be nothing other than a vast oven—or rather, several ovens. These were lime kilns, used for centuries to burn the limestone of the headland into lime for mortar and for the fields.

Latterly though, now that the building trade has lost the skill to use the old ways and lime was no longer dug and burned here, the kilns had become a favourite haunt in summer for young couples who thought that they might find privacy enough in the grassy hollows that were the long since blocked up chimneys of the ovens to engage their passions without fear of discovery; in fact the place was that popular the kilns were overbooked and you could hardly take a ten-minute daunder on a sunny day within a mile of the place without coming across some pair at it. But the local lovers had reckoned without Jock in the white cottage up the hill and his ex-MOD Barr and Stroud binoculars. Jocky looked forward to fine summer days as much as they, even if his pleasure was vicarious.

But now, as he slyly parted the curtains in his kitchen window with the back of one hand and peered gleefully out into the morn, it was not to watch the alfresco connubials of the local youth. For just on his side of the lime kilns was another cottage, set right on top of the limestone headland, which had once been the home of the kilnmaster, but

was now lived in by a certain Mr and Mrs Tadger. Dick and Alice came from the south—Kelso, if you must know; he was an engineer and he had a good job at a food processing factory in Montrose. For six months of the year, when the factory worked flat out canning the potatoes, peas, beans, and soft fruit that were the produce of the fertile hinterland, Dick worked nights. He liked it; the night-shift bonus was substantial, he and Alice put the money away, and they had a nice little rainy-day hoard. Forbye that, Dick liked the gofff, and this regime gave him plenty time to indulge himself.

Alice was the daughter of a minister, and she had grown up into an uncommonly attractive and trim blonde. She also had the libido and morals of a well-brought-up alley cat, a fact that everybody but Dick was fully aware of. No-one was ever going to tell *him*, on account of his being built like a brick shithouse and famously short-fused. Be that as it may, the year before, and not long after the Tadgers had moved into their cottage, Alice had somehow engineered a liaison with one Deek White, a driver for the North Star bus company. Deek was what you might cry a romantic young man, eager for instruction, like, and Alice was just delighted to oblige. She liked to keep busy, did our Alice. Got bored easily. And golf was not really her thing. Too vertical. Anyway, things could hardly have worked out better, for Deek—at Alice's suggestion—had volunteered for the early morning country school round, a job for which he had not much competition as it involved such an early start. But Deek was smart and reliable, so to sweeten the pill his manager let him take the bus home with him to save time in the mornings. So with little effort, Deek was ideally placed to profit from Alice's excess of urge.

This Monday was the first night shift of the new season at the factory, and Jock was up sharp with his binoculars at the ready; and he was not disappointed. At five-thirty on the dot the red-and-grey AEG Dreamliner bumped and rumbled down the rough track past his house to the lime kilns, did a three point turn with a rapidity that could only have been born of familiarity, parked outside the cottage, and out hopped Deek. His knuckles had not even fallen upon the panels before the door was flung open, a shapely—and naked, for Alice was not one to waste time— arm extended, and he was dragged inside.

Jock settled down with a mug of tea so strong the spoon would have stood up and a packet of digestives. He could hear his wife's snoring reverberating down the lobby and he switched on the radio to hear the farming report. But mostly he had his binoculars glued to his eyes, for Alice had a thing about sleeping with the curtains open and the view was absolutely excellent.

Deek had a habit of leaving things until the last moment, and this morning, being the first of the new season in more ways than one, as it were, he could perhaps have been forgiven for being a little tardy. At seven forty-five, by which time he should already have had the first brats aboard, the cottage door flew open and out flew Deek, his jacket and tie over his arm, his shoes untied, his shirt unbuttoned, struggling

with the zip on his trousers. He jumped into the bus and started it up and revved it with a smoke-belching roar of worn injectors (the bus's, not Deek's) that shook the earth, and then jammed it into gear and set off down the track in a shower of mud, whilst Alice leaned contentedly on the doorpost with a smile on her face, wearing only an Aran sweater to ward off the chill of the morning.

Fate handed out a cruel reward for the lover who had overstayed his time; for only a few moments before Deek had managed to disentangle himself from Alice's embrace, Paterson's cowman had gathered his herd from the field between the Tadgers' cottage and Jock's, and by the time that the ageing bus came bucketing down the narrow lane, the seventy-five Ayrshires were waddling and lowing their slow way to the milking parlour, their over-full udders spurting milk as they went waurstling up the brae. Poor Deek—his mind was elsewhere, you realise—rounded the corner and was almost upon them before he saw them. Cows being cows, they had thoroughly lubricated the already slippery road. Deek gasped, hit the brakes hard and the bus slid into a graceful sideways skid that was abruptly ended when it plunged off the road and into the ditch.

Jock, who had seen everything from his eyrie, threw back his head and opened his mouth. From the deepest recesses of his body came a shrieking, side-splitting, painful, quivering laugh that mounted rapidly in pitch and volume. He bent double and smacked his thigh and his dentures shot out and skittered across the kitchen floor. Della, rudely awakened from her noisy slumbers, shouldered her broad way in to see what her fool of a husband was making such a fuss about now, put her big toe in the false teeth, which promptly locked shut upon her pet corn, and fell to the floor with a wail. Jock sank to his knees and grasped the back of one of the chairs, now completely overwhelmed by the agony of his hysteria.

Meanwhile, Deek climbed, shaken and bruised and with blood trickling from a small cut on his forehead, from the cab and looked at his grey and red bus for a very long time. Then he kicked it. Really hard. Alice, who had watched the whole episode, horror-stricken, slammed the door and stamped her foot and swore, her mind jangling at the thought of the explanations that were going to be required when her husband arrived home in half an hour and found the lane that only led to his house blocked by a bus that had no business being there.

Paterson's cowman, who was named Tony and wore his hair in a pony-tail, was listening to Pink Floyd on his Walkman when it all happened. He never even noticed.